"Speak out now when others grow silent": The *Messenger*, the IWW and debates over New Negro radicalism

George Robertson

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The social and economic cleavages created during World War I facilitated a world wide political left-turn, with increasing numbers of workers, both white and black, questioning the political and economic status quo and embracing social movement organizations devoted to the dismantling or overthrow of capitalism. In the United States, one of the most potent symbol and manifestation of this insurgency was the increasingly close relationship between African Americans and white leftist groups.[1] The specter of Red-Black cooperation provoked a convergence of racist and anti-radical reactionary forces in the summer of 1919, with angry urban mobs seeking to punish recalcitrant blacks, and J. Edgar Hoover's Bureau of Intelligence effectively race baiting and imprisoning radicals of both races. In the context of this pervasive violence and repression at home, and American imperialist intervention abroad, many black radicals argued the need for new thinking, new tactics and new leadership that eschewed liberal reformism, challenged blind patriotism and

[1] Reed Ruth, *It Ain't Nice: What We Know About Nationalism and Class Struggle in the American Century* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 90.

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narrow nationalism, and sought to the answer the “Negro question” on a systemic level.2

Out of these ongoing debates emerged a “new radical spirit”, a symbol of a new militant posture among African Americans: the New Negro.3

While there is a tendency to treat this postwar insurgency as a time of unprecedented ecumenicalism among black radicals, it is important not to let the appearance of cooperation obscure the existence of a dynamic discourse on the nature and definition of New Negro radicalism.4 As black radical Hubert Harrison argued in October 1919, “Today Negroes differ on al those great questions on which white thinkers differ, and there are Negro radicals of every imaginary stripe – agnostics, atheists, I.W.W.’s, Socialists, Single Taxers, and even Bolshevists.”5 Indeed, Barbara Foley has shown how the meaning of the New Negro was highly contested during this period, with radicals, liberals and reactionaries each claiming the term to designate a plurality of ideological attitudes and postures.6 More broadly, though part of the same theoretical debate, radicals argued amongst themselves and against liberals about the desirability of radical leadership, as well as, more profoundly, the need to redefine the nature and meaning of ‘radicalism’ and reassess the criteria used for considering African American leaders ‘radical’.

This essay will focus on the role of the *Messenger*, the largest and most influential left-wing black monthly of the postwar years, and its editor’s role in promoting and cultivating what would become a dominant postwar representation of the New Negro as an “anti-capitalist radical who envisioned African American emancipation as inseparable from – if 2 Bush, *We Are Not What We Seem,* 104.

3 Bush, *We Are Not What We Seem,* 88.

4 Barbara Foley, *Specters of 1919: Class and Nation in the Making of the New Negro* (Urbana: University of Il inois Press, 2003), 66

5 Harrison, “Two Negro Radicalisms”, *New Negro,* October 1919, reprinted in Louis J. Parascandola ed., *Look For Me Al Around You: Anglophone Caribbean Immigrants in the Harlem Renaissance* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005), 148.

6 Foley, *Specters of 1919*, passim.

not identical with – the project of a class-conscious, multiracial al iance."7 In particular, I wil examine the significance of the under-studied relationship between the *Messenger* and the predominantly white radical labor organization, the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW).

Debates in the pages of the *Messenger* about the nature of radicalism, the desirability and efficacy of radical leadership and the solutions to "race problems" revolved around the editor's support for the theory, tactics and organization of IWW, and their (usual y liberal) opponent's unwil ingness or inability to support the IWW, or class-based labor organization in general. Although the *Messenger's* editors were certainly not alone amongst radicals in their cal s for class-conscious, interracial labor and political organization, their theoretical contributions served to significantly expand and refine the emerging discourse surrounding the New Negro figure. The *Messenger's* emphasis on interracial and international working class solidarity and anti-capitalism, articulated as it was through the concomitant debates over the IWW and the nature of black radicalism, served to magnify, strengthen and expand systemic critiques of US racism and exploitation inherent in black radical thought, and helped establish the editor's tenets of "modern economic and political radicalism" as a paradigm through which class-conscious postwar New Negro workers would judge the desirability and effectiveness of black leadership and action.

For radicals and reactionaries, black southern migrants and returning servicemen, the immediate postwar years were rife with contradictions and revolutionary possibilities.8 The Russian Revolution in October 1917 established the first worker's state, discredited reformist socialism and gave credence to the revolutionary organization and tactics of the working 7 Foley, *Specters of 1919*, p. 69.

8 Foley, *Specters of 1919*, 16.

class.9 On the back of worldwide labor unrest, and a wartime strike wave, workers in Seattle organized the first General Strike in United States history in February 1919, and in Moscow the next month, Communists established the Third International.10 The US government responded forceful y to this insurgency, indicting and imprisoning 184 IWW's and the leaders of the SPA for

sedition, engaging in widespread surveil ance campaigns under the auspices of the Bureau of Intel igence, and conducting multiple hearings and commissions, the most famous and far-reaching of which, was the Lusk Committee in New York state.11

The so-cal ed anti-radical “Red Summer” of 1919 referred concomitantly to the over forty urban race riots that occurred in major cities across the US, most notably Chicago and Washington DC.12 In September 1919, the *Messenger* carried an ominous guest editorial written by steadfast black radical W.A Domingo, warning white America that: No longer are Negroes wil ing to be shot down or hunted from place to place like wild beasts; no longer wil they flee from their homes and leave their property to the tender mercies of the howling and cowardly mob…The New Negro has arrived with stiffened back bone, dauntless manhood, defiant eye, steady hand and a wil of iron.13

In the months that fol owed the “Red Summer”, almost al commentators – liberal, radical and reactionary – agreed that the aggressive posture among African Americans represented a new attitude of militancy, and demonstrated the black community’s “increased unwil ingness to respond passively to abuse and violence.”14

Radical black critics argued, however, that this “present case of Negro discontent”

represented more than a purely spontaneous reaction to the particularly oppressive 9 Ibid, 16.

10 Foley, *Specters of 1919*, 15.

11 Philip Foner, “The IWW and the Black Worker,” *Journal of Negro History* 55 (January 1970),p. 58. Foley, *Specters of 1919,* 11.

12 Foley, *Specters of 1919*, 15.

13 W.A Domingo, “If we must die”, *Messenger*, September 1919, 4.

14 Foley, *Specters of 1919*, 13.

conditions of urban America, but was rather part of a “great pandemic”, a reflection of a spirit of internationalism and a recognition amongst these New Negroes that the fate of the black community in the United States was intimately connected to the wel being of other oppressed groups across the world.15 Yet while black radicals could agree with Hubert Harrison that “the cause of the “radicalism” among American Negroes is international”, they argued amongst themselves and with liberals and black nationalists over what kind of international movements these New Negro blacks were and should be aligning themselves with.16 Was this New Negro insurgency inspired by the international “exploitation of laborers by capitalists”, or the “social, political and economic subjugation of colored people by white”, or a combination of both?17 It was in the context of this dynamic discourse that the *Messenger* made a significant contribution to developing and extending an anti-capitalist critique of US that argued class conscious col aboration between white and black workers was the most expedient and truthful expression of the New Negro’s desire for economic and social change.

The *Messenger* was founded by two Socialist Party members, A Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen in 1917, and would achieve a monthly circulation of 150,000 by 1919.18 As Philip Foner argues, “in its militancy, the *Messenger* was far in advance of anything up to that point in the history of black radicalism.”19 The *Messenger’s* editors devoted themselves to the

“scientific” study of race and class relations, in which the problems of racial discrimination 15 Harrison, “Two Negro Radicalisms”, in *Look For Me Al Around You,* 149, Domingo, ‘If we must die’, *Messenger*, September 1919. Bush , *We Are Not What We Seem*, p. 103. Foley, *Specters of 1919*, 14.

16 Harrison, “Two Negro Radicalisms”, in *Look For Me Al Around You,* 149. According to the *Messenger*, “[The New Negro]

is the product of the same worldwide forces that have brought into being the great liberal and radical movements that are now seizing the reins of political, economic and social power in all of the civilized countries of the world.” *Messenger,* August 1920, 74.

17 Harrison, “Two Negro Radicalisms”, in *Look For Me Al Around You*, 149

18 Kornweibel, *No Crystal Stair: Black Life and the Messenger, 1917-1928*

(Westport: Greenwood Press, 1975) , xvi. Foley, *Specters of 1919*, 50.

19 Quoted in Foley, *Specters of 1919*, 69.

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and inequality were understood as a function of capitalist development. According to historian Rod Bush, Randolph saw class as an economic category "without social or cultural limits", and hence viewed cultural nationalism and the dominant "100 percent Americanism"

as "an obstacle both to the class struggle and to the Black freedom struggle."20 Pursuant of their belief in the significance of black worker's economic relationship to the means of production and their fel ow workers, the *Messenger's* editors saw labor organization as the most immediate goal, beyond armed self-defense, for the protection and eventual emancipation of the black working class, and sought to establish an al iance between black workers and white labor movement.21 The editors' early syndicalist tendencies, certainly reflective of their sympathy for and relationship with the Industrial Workers of the World would, by the mid-1920's, be supplanted by a much less radical and at times openly class col aborationist brand of Kautskyian Marxist reformism.22 During its formative years however, particularly 1919 and early 1920, the *Messenger* was general y recognized among radicals and reactionaries alike as the foremost uncompromising voice of anti-capitalist New Negro radicalism.23

The Industrial Workers of the World was founded in Chicago in 1905 in response and opposition to the exclusionary craft practices of the conservative American Federation of Labor and the increasing centralization of productive industry in the hands of a few powerful conglomerates.24 The IWW sought to organize the entire working class into One Big Union of industrial workers to "take possession of the earth and the machinery of 20 Bush, *We Are Not What We Seem*, 92-93.

21 Bush, *We Are Not What We Seem* , 102.

22 Sterling Spero, and Abram L. Harris, *The Black Worker: The Negro and the Labor Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1931). 389. Bush, *We Are Not What We Seem*, 92.

23 President Wilson's Justice Department cal ed the *Messenger*, "the most

dangerous of all Negro publications", during this period. Kornweibel, *Seeing Red*: *Federal Campaigns Against Black Militancy, 1919-1925* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 77-99. Bush, *We Are Not What We Seem*, 92.

24 Philip Foner, "The IWW and the Black Worker," 45.

production, and abolish the wage system."25 As significant as their American-syndicalist conviction that workers should eschew the bal ot box and "organize on the job, where you are robbed", was the organization's militant and unwavering commitment to ensuring that

"no working man or woman shal be excluded from membership because of creed or color."26 Indeed, according to the IWW, "there is no race problem…there is only a class problem", ostensibly because "the economic interests of al workers, be they white, black brown or yel ow, are identical" based on their shared class position.27 The IWW saw racism as the exclusive product of capitalist exploitation, maintaining that a chief tactic of "the exploiters" was "to play race against race on the slave market and reap fruit from the struggle in the shape of a low wage scale."28 The organization of black and other colored workers together with their white brothers was thus considered an essential "bread and butter"

economic issue for al workers.29

Although the record of the IWW's engagement with the "race question" is notably stronger than the Socialist Party of America's, the two organizations shared a similar conviction that, in the words of Socialist leader Eugene V. Debs, "we have nothing special to offer the Negro," apart, as the IWW stated, from "giving him the same membership privileges as are the common property of al who join."30 Unlike the SPA, however, the IWW did have some success in black communities, gaining significant, if somewhat fleeting membership amongst black lumberjacks in Louisiana before WWI (as part of the organization of the IWW-affiliated Brotherhood of Timber Workers), and on the 25 "The Preamble of the I.W.W", *Industrial Worker*, April 29, 1909, 2.

26 Joyce L. Kornbluh, ed, *Rebel Voices: An I.W.W Anthology* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1972), 12. Foner ,

“The IWW and the Black Worker”, 46.

27 “A Class, Not Race Problem”, *Industrial Worker*, February 3, 1917, 3.

28 “An Appeal to Colored Workers” *Industrial Worker*, September 20, 1919, 4.

29 Foner, “The IWW and the Black Worker,” 46.

30 *Industrial Worker*, Feb 3, 1917, Foner, “The IWW and the Black Worker,” 49. Foley, *Specters of 1919*, 86. Spero, and Harris, *The Black Worker*, 405.

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Philadelphia docks, with the Marine Transport Workers Industrial Union, Local 8 from 1913

to 1923.31 It was during this latter period, particularly during and after World War I, that the IWW reached its organizational nadir, primarily as a result of significant governmental persecution. It was also, not coincidental y, when the union began to make a more conspicuous appeal to black workers (coming north during the Great Migration), and the *Messenger* emerged as the leading black magazine dedicated to revolutionary radicalism.

In every edition of the Messenger published in 1919, the editors made strong appeals to black workers to affiliate with the IWW.32 In an article in the July edition entitled “Why Negroes Should Join the I.W.W”, the editors reminded black workers that, “The IWW is the only labor organization in the United States which draws no race or color line.”33

Furthermore, considering that “the only recourse the Negro has is industrial action…it is simply logical for him to throw his lot in with the Industrial Workers of the World” who dealt chiefly with unskil ed laborers, and “stand on the principle of industrial unionism.”34 In another article in the same edition, “Negro Workers: The AFL or IWW”, the editors continued to articulate their belief in the importance of labor organization as a revolutionary force, and their support for the IWW. Discussing the role of the ruling classes in fomenting

“artificial race hatred and division by poisoning the minds of both whites and blacks” the editors conclude that:

The only problem then, which the colored worker should consider, as a worker, is the problem of organizing with other working men in the labor organization which 31 Lisa McGirr, 'Black and White Longshoremen in the IWW: A History of the Philadelphia Marine Transport Workers Industrial Union Local 8', *Labor History*, 36: 3 (1995), 377-402.

David Roediger, "Gaining a hearing for Black-White Unity: Covington Hal and the Complexities of Race, Gender and Class," in *Towards the Abolition of Whiteness; Essays on Race, Politics and Working Class History* (London, Verso, 1994).

32 Kornweibel, *No Crystal Stair*, 178.

33 *Messenger*, July 1919, 8.

34 *Messenger*, July 1919, 8.

best expresses the interests of the whole working class against the slavery and oppression of the whole capitalist class: The IWW.35

Thus, not only should black workers align themselves with the IWW as a reaction to the exclusionary tactics of the mainstream American Federation of Labor (which was "a machine for the propagation of racial prejudice"), but also, more importantly, because organizing along class lines would best support their efforts to realize "the prospect of REAL FREEDOM".36

The IWW's tactics of the One Big Union and the General Strike seemed to be particularly appealing to the *Messenger's* editors, and helped them to situate African American labor struggles within a world-wide framework of class conscious solidarity between workers.37 In September 1919, the Messenger carried an article entitled "The March of Industrial Unionism", in which they attacked craft union tactics, the "slowness and inadequacy of political action" and lauded the spread of industrial unionism.38 For the editors, the "magic phrase" 'One Big Union' was a "logical and revolutionary" response to the concentration of capital; "the antidote for capitalist poisons."39 Particularly promising for the editors was the fact that "the principles of the One Big Union are swiftly encircling the globe…from the Pacific coast…to the Atlantic, across the ocean to Europe, and then to Asia."40 Suggesting that the emancipation of

African American workers lay in their solidarity with other similarly oppressed workers around the world reflected the *Messenger* editor's desire to establish black worker's economic relationships and class position as the most significant and appropriate organizing tool for the New Negro.

35 *Messenger*, July 1919, 8.

36 *Messenger*, July 1919, 8, 14.

37 *Messnger*, August, 1919, 8, September , 1919, 6.

38 *Messenger*, September, 1919, 6.

39 *Messenger*, September, 1919, 6 Kornweibel, *No Crystal Stair*, 179.

40 *Messenger*, September, 1919, 6.

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Not only were the *Messenger's* editors supportive of the IWW's theoretical and tactical goals and the symbolic rhetoric of the IWW as a tool for worldwide social and economic reconstruction, but they also used a Local of the IWW as a substantive example of the concrete, economistic gains that could be made by black and white workers if they committed themselves to class-conscious interracial organization.41 Local 8 of the IWW's Marine Transport Workers Union in Philadelphia argued the Messenger, "was a living example of the ability of white and black people to work, live and conduct their common affairs side by side."42 The Local, composed of 3,500 stevedores, three-fifths of whom were African American, had control ed the docks since 1913, and were "setting an example which labor groups throughout the country must emulate if the Ku Klux Klan…is to be destroyed and the Open Shop campaign is to fail."43 As suggested, Local 8 was significant for the *Messenger*, as an example of both interracial harmony, and as "lever with which the men have raised their wages."44 Significantly, it was one of the "few labor organizations which has given whole-hearted support, moral and financial," to the *Messenger's* editor's attempts "to spread…Brotherhood propaganda among the white and black workers", contributing amounts to the *Messenger's* publication fund.45

The attempts by some members of the Local and their outside supporters to form a separate "race first" organization of black longshoremen provided the

Messenger with an opportunity to reify their belief that, with the guidance of good leadership and proper education in class consciousness, African American worker's economic and social struggles 41 "Colored and White Workers Solving the Race Problem For Philadelphia", The *Messenger*, July 1921, 214, "The Forum of Local 8", August 1921, 234, "The Task of Local 8 – The Marine Transport Workers of Philadelphia", October 1921, 262,

"Local 8 of the IWW in the Firing Line" February 1922, 355.

42 *Messenger*, August 1921, 234.

43 *Messenger*, October 1921, 263.

44 *Messenger*, July 1921, 214. Kornweibel, *No Crystal Stair*, 179. Indeed scholars have been quick to point out that Local 8 was one of the few IWW locals to successfully practice day-to-day job control. See Spero and Harris, *Black Worker*, 335, and McGirr, "Black and White Longshoremen in the IWW", 379.

45 *Messenger*, October 1921, 263. Kornweibel, *No Crystal Stair,* 179.

were best served by an al iance with white workers.46 As wel as ongoing attempts by the conservative International Longshoremen's Association and employers to destroy the union by "preaching a race-riot doctrine of segregation", in the summer of 1921, "alleged Negro leaders masquerading in the guise of race loyalty, had been preaching the nefarious and dangerous doctrine of race segregation to the Negro members of Local 8."47 In response, the Local "proceeded to conduct an educational campaign in leaflets and forum lectures", "a systematic forum in self education" that resulted in "the militant, class-conscious and intel igent Negro workers" reaffirming their commitment to interracial solidarity.48 For the editors of the *Messenger*, this expression of class consciousness epitomized the spirit of the New Negro, and suggested exactly how "the race problem" could be "worked out by black and white workers," provided, that is, that they recognize that "power lies in solidarity –

which is achieved through industrial organization."49

The defense of the IWW and its tactics from the criticism of more liberal leaders

helped the editors redefine their vision of New Negro radicalism, and emphasize anti-capitalism as both a benchmark for judging African American radicalism, and as a precondition to leadership of the black working class. Between July 1919 and September 1921, The *Messenger* ran four large articles directly attacking prominent black leader W.E.B

Du Bois for his lack of support for the IWW and its tactics, his al eged uncritical patriotism, and his unwil ingness to actively substantively support organizing efforts among black 46 Spero and Harris, *Black Worker*, 335.

47 *Messenger*, August 1921, 234.

48 Messenger, August 1921, 234, October 1921, 263.

49 Messneger, July, 1921, 215.

workers.50 These unflinching criticisms of Du Bois came almost exactly a year after Randolph's withering attacks of his "Closed Ranks" editorial in July 1918.51

The first article was written in response to an editorial al egedly written by Du Bois in the April edition of the *Crisis*, in which Du Bois, referring to African Americans, posits;

"Suppose we had yielded to German propaganda, suppose we had refused to shoulder arms, or had wrought mischief and confusion, patterning ourselves after the IWW and the pro-Germans of this country, How should we hold up our heads?"52 The editors of the Messenger "took Du Bois to task", reminding readers that the IWW "is the only national organization of labor unions which does not discriminate against Negroes," and that as such,

"A Negro should be the last person to try and cast aspersions upon the IWW."53 In response to Du Bois's claim "we do not believe that the methods of the IWW are today feasible or advisable," the editors provided a lengthy rebuttal, outlining the necessity and feasibility of industrial unionism, reminding readers that the One Big Union principle had spread across the world, and indicating that Du Bois' lack of knowledge of this made him as ignorant to the real needs of the black working class as "the average clay-eating cracker of Georgia."54

These attacks on Du Bois functioned as part of a larger debate on the meaning of radicalism. Fundamental y, the *Messenger's* editors believed that Du Bois' failure to "apply the searchlight of scientific criticism" to the "Negro problem", and his concomitant lack of support for the methods and tactics of industrial unionism and the IWW, rendered him liberal rather than radical, and hence completely undesirable as a leader of the New Negroes.55 In a scathing critique of prominent black leaders, spanning the October and 50 *Messenger*, July, 1919, 10, October, 1919, 17, December 1919, 7, and September 1921, 246.

51 Bush, *We Are Not What We Seem*, 92.

52 *Crisis*, April, 1919, 269. *Messenger*, July 1919, 10.

53 *Messenger*, July 1919, 10.

54 *Messenger*, July 1919, 10.

55 *Messenger*, October, 1919, 18.

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December 1919 issues, the editors attack Du Bois for his inattention to the "inevitable consequences of hidden but powerful social forces." For Randolph and Owen, a radical critique of social relations did not rest on merely attacking the manifestations of a political system – "a Negro who opposes lynching demands the vote, condemns the Jim-crow car" –

as this "political organization is very little bit more than the regulative organization through which the economic forces in the background express themselves."56 Rather, for the editors, a leader could and should only be considered radical when they criticized the economic establishment that supported the political and social status quo.57 Against this measure, Du Bois was subsequently found lacking. The main test Randolph and Owen used to reveal his liberalism was his lack of support for the IWW, which they believe proves his "crass ignorance of economics of labor and industry."58 Considering that "the chief need of the Negro is the organization of his industrial power… One who has neither political or industrial radicalism can hardly be cal ed a radical in the strictest sense of the world."59

Significantly, by attacking Du Bois' "lamentable incapacity to think fundamental

y", his lack of a visible commitment to "the interest of unionizing Negro workers" and the IWW, and his class col aborationist attitude towards the Republican and Democratic party as indicative of "the policy of the "Old Crowd Negro", the editors used the debate about the nature and definition of black radicalism to pioneer and promote a more militant, class conscious image of the "New Crowd Negro".

As wel as attacking African American leaders allegedly ambivalent or openly hostile to labor organization, the Messenger devoted considerable space during the immediate postwar years to drawing attention to those 'race' leaders who were committed to the 56 *Messenger,* October, 1919, 18.

57 *Messenger*, May/June 1919: "Whoever seeks to find the root cause of social disease is a radical."

58 *Messenger*, October, 1919, 18.

59 *Messenger*, October, 1919, 18.

promotion of labor militancy among the New Negroes. Perhaps unsurprisingly, considering what we have seen above, the leader who received the most consistent attention was black I.W.W leader Ben Fletcher, organizer for the Marine Transport Workers Industrial Union Local 8 in Philadelphia, and the only black Wobbly serving time in Leavenworth prison for sedition.60 In eight articles between 1919 and 1921 the *Messenger* campaigned to raise awareness about the political plight of IWW and other "class war" prisoners, and concomitantly to promote the aims of industrial unionism, as espoused by the little-known Fletcher, who according to the editors, "has a vision far beyond that of almost any Negro leader whom we know."61 What made Fletcher such an appealing leader, argued the *Messenger*, was his wil ingness to throw "his lot in with his fel ow white workers, who work side by side to raise their standard of living."62 Fletcher's incarceration was used by the editors as an opportunity to again draw strong distinctions between "smug, sleek" Old Crowd Negro leaders "who swerve, compromise and equivocate for soft berths, fat salaries and slothful ease", and those committed to the "principle" of "to the workers belongs the world."63

The lynchpin here, as in the *Messenger's* attacks on Du Bois, was Fletcher's

“unremitting fight in the class war”, his willingness to “sin against the sacred creed and dogma of financial imperialism”, and his active “fights for the great masses to lessen their hours of work, to increase their wages, to decrease their high cost of living, to make life more livable.”64 In contrast to Du Bois, Fletcher’s unwavering class-consciousness, 60 Foner, “The IWW and the Black Worker”, 58.

61 *Messenger*, August, 1919, 28. See also, May-June, 1919, 10, December 1919, 19, August 1921, 235, September 1921, 244, November 1921, 273, January 1922, 329.

62 *Messenger*, August, 1919, 28.

63 *Messenger*, August 1919, 29. May-June 1919, 10.

64 *Messenger*, December 1919, 19. August 1919, 28 July 1921, 213.

commitment to industrial organization and opposition to imperialism made him an ideal leader of the New Negroes.

The editor’s admonition that black and white workers actively protest his imprisonment obviously resonated, as a steady flow of letters cal ing for his release started to reach President Harding by 1921.65 Although he did not have his sentence commuted until 1923, the campaign to free Ben Fletcher served a more immediate symbolic purpose for the *Messenger’s* editors. In the context of debates amongst radicals and against liberals and conservatives over the desirability of new radical leadership, the *Messenger’s* defense of Fletcher and emphasis on his distinctive leadership qualities was an important means for the editors to articulate and promote their vision of a class-conscious New Negro committed to interracial organization and anti-capitalism.

As we have suggested from the outset, The *Messenger’s* efforts to shape postwar black radicalism existed within the context of an extensive debate amongst black radicals about the most expedient ways and means to organize and prosecute black struggle. It is important to remember that the concurrent dialectic between revolutionary and reactionary forces and the dynamic and evolving debate amongst black radicals during this period, ensured that the definition and course of New Negro radicalism was very much uncharted, and the desirability and

efficacy of radical new leadership in contest. The ideological convictions of the *Messenger's* editors thus represented only one of the multitude of theoretical positions held by postwar black radicals, and these other radicals often had suspicions or criticisms of the *Messenger's* unilateral support for interracial col aboration. Chal enging the *Messenger's* position, erstwhile black Socialist Hubert Harrison argued that "it is not the Class Line, but 65 Foner, "IWW and the Black Worker", 59. *Messenger*, July 1921, 213.

the Color Line" to which New Negroes were reacting.66 He argued that New Negroes were and should be cultivating a "race-first" consciousness in recognition of the special nature of their oppression, and an understanding that "race feeling is…deeper than class feeling and will outlast the capitalist system."67 In particular, Harrison argued that because the Socialist Party of America had consistently "insisted on Race first and class after" New Negroes should refuse to put "either socialism or your party above the cal of your race."68 Reflecting the influence of early Leninist doctrines of self-determination, and expressing a similar sentiment to Harrison, Cyril Briggs, editor of the militant journal the *Crusader* and leader of the proto-Communist African Blood Brotherhood, argued that while it was a "possibility"

that white and black workers could "live together in peace and equality", it was by no means inevitable, even with the replacement of capitalism with some form of socialism.69 While both these men were certainly anti-capitalists and did support interracialism in theory, they were much more critical than the *Messenger's* editors about the efficacy of exclusively class based organization.

In this context of skepticism amongst other radicals about the prospects of interracial organizing it is significant that the *Messenger* would devote so much attention to promoting labor unity as one of the fundamental tenets of the New Negro posture.

Significantly, the *Messenger* recognized that its relationships with the IWW and other radical white leftist groups should not only serve to promote class consciousness among black workers, but must also as an example to white labor of the importance of committing to the organization of African Americans. Indeed, as the editors' saw it, "the Negro radical's task"

was not merely to “educate Negroes so that they may understand their class interests”, but 66 Harrison, “Two Negro Radicalisms”, in *Look For Me Al Around You,* 149.

67 Harrison, “Race First vs. Class First”, reprinted in Jeffrey B. Perry (ed)., *A Hubert Harrison Reader* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2001), 108-109.

68 Harrison, “Race First vs. Class First”, 109.

69 Briggs, The Salvation of the Negro’, reprinted in *Look For Me All Around You*, 208.

also as significantly to convince unionists and radicals that “organized labor must harness the discontent of Negroes and direct it into working-class channels for working class emancipation.”70 The editors were always quick to remind white workers that “organized labor cannot afford to ignore any labor factor of production which organized capital does not ignore,” and that “the combination of black and white workers wil be a powerful lesson to the capitalists of the solidarity of labor.”71 Pursuant of this conviction in the shared responsibility of interracial unionism, Randolph and Owen founded the National Association for the Promotion of Labor Unionism Amongst Negroes in mid 1919, with the catch cry “Black and White Workers Unite.”72 The Association served as a vehicle for the editors to denounce the continuing exclusionary practices of AFL unions, while at the same time promote the IWW and its industrial organizational tactics to black and white workers.73

When three white workers were kil ed protecting a black labor organizer from a lynch mob in Bogalusa, Louisiana in November 1919, the Messenger’s editors proclaimed: You are learning! You are on the right road. Your enemy is the Southern white employing class not the Negroes. Your only weapon is the solidarity of the working class, black and white…So, let us educate labor. Circularize white labor unions, not Southern white capitalist, anti-Negro governors.74

The editor’s establishment of the National Association for the Promotion of Labor Unionism Amongst Negroes and the support for class conscious white Southerners was a logical concomitant to their attacks on Du Bois, promotion of

Local 8’s brand of interracial unionism, and their vision of activist black workers at the vanguard of postwar labor 70 *Messenger*, May/June 1919, 20

71 *Messenger*, August 1919, 11.

72 *Messenger*, August 1921, 11. Kornweibel, *No Crystal Stair*, 179.

73 *Messenger*, August 1921, 11. Kornweibel, *No Crystal Stair*, 179.

74 *Messenger*, February 1920, 2.

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organization, neither abandoning nor exculpating white workers for what the editor’s recognized was pervasive white working class racism.

Indeed, as wel as existing as a substantive example of the potential of interracial class-consciousness, the relationship between the IWW and Messenger also ultimately served to influence the IWW’s awareness of “race issues” and attentiveness to the organization of African Americans. Although it is certain that the IWW made a stronger effort to organize African Americans during 1919, the over-exaggerated, alarmist and often completely false nature of government and newspaper sources, makes it difficult to ascertain the extent to which these constituted the “*desperate ef orts* to get the colored men into the One Big Union”

the *Messenger* spoke so approvingly of.75 Indeed, the relationship between the *Messenger* and the IWW served reactionary whites as a potent symbol of the dangerous potential of a new Red-Black al iance.76 Reflecting the tendency to emphasize the passivity and ignorance of the black working class, government officials, mainstream newspapers and the white public were convinced that IWW and Bolshevik agitation and propaganda was the primary cause of the 1919 race riots, and that by cynical y utilizing the *Messenger* the IWW was able to unilaterally

“sow discontent” and “subvert the black population”77 In July and August 1919, the *New York Times* carried a series of incendiary articles, quoting extensively from the pages of the *Messenger* as evidence that “Reds are Working amongst Negroes”; “Radicals Inciting Negroes to Violence”; “Reds Try to Stir Negroes to Revolt “ “Negroes of World Prey of Agitators”;

“Russian Reds and IWW blamed for Race Riot”.78

75 *Messenger*, August 1921, 11.

76 Theodore Kornweibel, *Seeing Red*, 22. See *New York Times*, October 19, 1919, August 27, 1919, August 24, 1919, July 28, 1919, and August 4, 1919.

77 Kornweibel, *Seeing Red*, 22. *New York Times*, August 27, 1919.

78 Kornweibel, *Seeing Red*, 84. *New York Times*, October 19, 1919, August 27, 1919, August 24, 1919, July 28, 1919, August 4, 1919. Theodore Kornweibel Jr., *No Crystal Stair*, 78.

While these articles, among many others, are a helpful il umination of the anxieties of the white employing class, their shril tenor makes it difficult to get a realistic sense of the substantive nature of the IWW’s role in organizing black workers. Despite the fact that scholars seem to agree that the IWW “never succeeded in recruiting the great mass of black workers”, the organization’s relationship with the *Messenger* nonetheless expanded the frequency of its’ appeals to black workers, and its awareness of the importance of black activism and the *Messenger* in postwar radical discourse.79

During the height of Red Summer, the IWW reprinted a series of articles on black workers from the *Messenger*.80 Recognizing that they “seldom take the trouble to draw attention to a periodical printed outside the organization”, the editors praised the article

“Negro Workers: Unionism or Slavery”, as “the best article on this subject we have ever seen.”81 Furthermore, they commended the *Messenger* as “one of the foremost of the radical magazines…destined to be a powerful factor in organizing the colored workers industrial y along with their white fel ow workers.”82 As wel as these reprints, the IWW’s organ the *Industrial Worker* also displayed increased editorial attention to the conditions of the black worker, addressing the organization’s understanding of the relationship between capitalism and race riots, and the necessity of interracial organization. Thus, despite the long-term inability of the IWW to attract a large black fol owing, during the postwar period, in the context of its relationship with the *Messenger*, the IWW began to make more concerted efforts to appeal to and propagate the

kind of class-consciousness that Randolph and Owen argued characterized the New Negro posture.

79 Foner, “IWW and the Black Worker”, 60. Kornweibel, *No Crystal Stair*, 180.

80 “Negro Workers: Unionism or Slavery ”, *Industrial Worker*, July 16, 1919, 1. “Why Negroes Should Join the IWW”, July 30, 1919, 2. Foley, *Specters of 1919*, 67.

81 *Industrial Worker*, July 16 1919, 1.

82 *Industrial Worker*, July 16 1919, 1.

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From the revolutionary crucible of 1919, the complicated nexus of class and racial unrest and the theoretical debates and substantive actions of postwar African Americans emerged the militant figure of the New Negro, engaged in an interconnected fight against racism and capitalism.83 Over the course of five years, the term would increasingly come to be associated with the cultural expressions of the Harlem Renaissance, and would evolve to signify a posture of aggressive individualism far removed from its militant, anti-capitalist roots. 84 As we have seen throughout this paper, the *Messenger* played a significant role in promoting this initial anti-capitalist, class-conscious posture among postwar New Negroes.

Central to this contribution was the magazine’s fiery rebuke of “Old Crowd Negroes” and its dynamic discourse with other black leaders on the desirably and feasibility of radical leadership and the theoretical, tactical and structural imperatives of interracial industrial organization. The *Messenger* editors, recognizing that “when one is uninformed about the nature of a movement he is disinclined to entertain it, and when one is misinformed concerning the objects and aims of a movement he is inclined to oppose it,” endeavored to educate and promote anti-capitalist, pro-labor radicalism amongst black workers by suggesting that both their short-term wel being and eventual economic, social and political emancipation could both be achieved only through the kind of al iance with class conscious white workers espoused by IWW leaders such as Ben Fletcher, and demonstrated substantively IWW Local 8. By discrediting and lampooning the leadership programs of the

“Old Crowd Negro” as antithetical to the welfare of black workers, the *Messenger* established a clear paradigm of “modern economic and political radicalism” that amplified and expanded the theoretical importance of class consciousness, interracial labor unity, anti-capitalism, and internationalism in the discourse surrounding the meaning and definition of the New Negro 83 Foley, *Specters of 1919*, 31.

84 Bush, *We Are Not What We Seem*, 88. Foley, *Specters of 1919*, passim.

figure. Thus, as we have seen, supporting the IWW and its egalitarian, anti-capitalist radicalism was a means for The *Messenger’s* editors to articulate and reaffirm their own vision of New Negro radicalism and militancy, at once building on and expanding the scope and heterogeneity of postwar black activism.

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